

# Standardisation a Considerable Force behind Language Death: A Case of Shona

Isaac Mhute

Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Language and Media studies, Zimbabwe Open University,  
Masvingo Regional Campus

## Abstract

The paper assesses the contribution of standardisation towards language death taking Clement Doke's resolutions on the various Shona dialects as a case study. It is a qualitative analysis of views gathered from speakers of the language situated in various provinces of Zimbabwe, the country in which the language is spoken by around 75% of the population. It is argued that, under normal circumstances, standardisation should not result in people having to cede more than half of their way of speaking. The paper demonstrates how people speaking varieties that were initially treated as independent languages may be forced to speak in a prescribed way inspite of whether they really speak the same language or not which in turn leads to language shift and death. The language policy of the entire nation would result in the disappearance of motivation to continue with the old way of speaking which in turn leads to the death of that particular language or way of speaking. The paper recommends nations to understand the importance of multilingualism and labour for its preservation.

**Keywords:** Standardisation, language death, Shona

## Introduction

Language is a system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/language>). Taking such a definition would mean every language variety also qualifies as a language in its own right. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dialect> defines a dialect as a variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, vocabulary and its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially. It is also believed to be a language considered as one of a group that have a common ancestor. Having a common ancestor would ensure the varieties share most of the important features involved. Minor elements like accent and vocabulary normally vary from one variety to the other. As such one would never expect treatment of languages from different ancestors as varieties of one language. This means before languages are considered to be varieties of the same language, research or fact finding must be carried out properly to assert their historical background.

Furthermore, mutual intelligibility usually prevails between varieties of the same language. This varies in degrees with those usually in contact sharing much more than others, hence its treatment as a continuum. However, it is important for language planners not to ignore some of the features of the languages under consideration for the sake of standardisation as this might lead to the death of those languages. The paper is an effort to demonstrate how ignorance of certain linguistic features might result in the suppression of some languages through standardisation and ultimately language death.

## Standardisation

Crystal (1997) regards a dialect as a language variety in which the use of grammar, vocabulary and accent identifies the regional or social background of the speaker. Thus the varieties are versions of the same language with minor differences due to the regions in which they are situated. Crystal also views standardisation as a process of making varieties conform to the standard way of speaking and writing prescribed for the entire language. It involves status planning and corpus planning to codify the selected norm.

The language planners need to carry out a fact finding exercise first in order to establish the truth of the languages in question. This involves making sure of their historical backgrounds and the relationship between them. After making sure that they belong to the same language, they would proceed to determine a common way of speaking and writing the language. Gaps in vocabulary, grammar or sounds would then be filled up to ensure a complete representation of the entire language. Once this is done, implementation of the chosen and codified norm would labour to ensure that people shift from their old ways of using the language. This would involve motivation of the language users by the government or non-governmental organisations to ensure the entire speech community change their behaviour and start using the prescribed norm.

## Language Death

Crystal (2000) defines language death (also language extinction, linguistic extinction or linguicide) as a process that occurs when a language loses its last native speaker. Language death is a process that affects speech communities where the level of linguistic competence that speakers possess of a given language variety is

decreased, eventually resulting in no native or fluent speakers of the variety. Language death may affect any language idiom, including dialects and languages. Fishman (1991) notes that the most common process leading to language death is one in which a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual in another language, and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language until they cease to use their original (or heritage) language. This is a process of assimilation which may be voluntary or may be forced upon a population. Speakers of some languages, particularly regional or minority languages may decide to abandon them based on economic or utilitarian grounds, in favour of languages regarded as having greater utility or prestige (Lewis and Garry, 2010).

The paper argues that if improperly done, standardisation may force people into regarding their heritage language as impure and move towards a different language prescribed as the norm. Absence of motivation towards the language would render it irrelevant fuelling language shift and ultimately language death.

### Doke's Resolutions versus 2013 Findings

According to Guthrie (1948), Shona (or ChiShona) is a Bantu language, native to the Shona people of Zimbabwe and southern Zambia. The term is also used to identify peoples who speak one of the Shona language dialects, namely Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndau and Korekore following Clement Doke's resolutions of 1931 (Mhute, 2011). Mutasa (1996) notes that some researchers include Kalanga whilst others recognise Kalanga as a distinct language in its own right.

Shona is a principal language of Zimbabwe, along with Ndebele and the official business language, English. As noted earlier on, the language is spoken by a percentage of about 75% of the people in Zimbabwe. Mutasa (1996) notes that, according to ethnologue, the five major dialects of Shona are natively spoken by 13.8 million people making it one of the largest Bantu languages. Other countries hosting Shona language speakers are Zambia, Botswana and Mozambique. It is a written standard language with an orthography and grammar that was codified by Clement Doke (a linguist highered by the then Rhodesian government) during the early 20th century and fixed in the 1950s. Shona is taught in the schools but is not the general medium of instruction in other subjects. It has literature and is described through monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (chiefly Shona - English).

Mutasa (1996) notes that modern Shona is based on the dialect spoken by the Karanga people of Masvingo Province, the region around Great Zimbabwe as well as Zezuru spoken by people of central and northern Zimbabwe, that is, the area around Harare province. This position has led most speakers of the other three varieties (Manyika, Korekore and Ndau) doubt the importance of their heritage varieties as they must speak the prescribed norm that is basically Zezuru and Karanga. They highlight the fact that speaking in their heritage variety would make them sound out of place as it would sound very marked when viewed in light of the standard variety. They say it draws the attention of almost everyone and the majority would make funny out of it. They argue that making their children acquire their traditional variety would as well present them with problems at school where they would have to speak and write in the standard norm. Such a scenario they say has forced them to completely shift towards the prescribed norm. They argue that such a position would certainly ensure the disappearance of first language speakers of these varieties as their children are no longer comfortable with acquiring them. If language death can be talked of in dialects (as indicated earlier) then this is an example of language death resulting from standardisation that does not fairly represent the involved varieties.

The matter attracts more attention following the outcome of the 2013 fieldwork that yielded the 2013 Zimbabwean constitution. It came out that Ndau is really a language on its own right rather than a dialect of Shona. Section 6 (1) of the current Constitution reads: "The following languages, namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Khoisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe (The Financial Gazette of 15 September 2015)." Therefore, it is now considered as one of the 16 official languages in Zimbabwe. This is a sound decision considering the historical background of the speakers who have since indicated that they came from South Africa and are descendants of Soshangane, one of the leaders who fled from Shaka during the Mfecane era. A close analysis of the language supports this claim so well as Ndau has clicks, and sound combinations like /dhl/ which are typical of Nguni languages and unheard of in Shona.

This points to a situation whereby standardisation has erroneously bunched an independent language under another language for around 85 years. Ndau contributed almost nothing to the orthography that served its speakers which indicates that they were being forced to ignore their heritage language in favour of another. One wonders whether there are still enough first language speakers to revive it and what would have happened had it stayed under such a situation for fifteen more years considering the low life expectancy in Zimbabwe. This was worsened by the motivation to speak Shona in Zimbabwe where it is one of the two national languages and one must speak it unless he/she resides in Matabeleland where Ndebele takes over. This means the Ndau speakers had no option other than taking Shona so seriously and it meant being forced to shift from Ndau. It would have been better had it remained one of the minority languages as speakers would have labored to keep intact for the

sake of passing it on to the next generation. The Financial Gazette of 15 September 2015 demonstrates how speakers of minority languages fight for the preservation of their heritage languages citing Basilwizi a group that is making considerable progress in fighting for the promotion of Tonga in Zimbabwe. In the case of Ndau, standardisation erroneously made the speakers believe their heritage language to be a useless impure variety of a different language. The damage this had on their motivation to preserve and fight for the language's promotion cannot be underscored.

### Discussion

The paper argues that standardisation must be treated as a very delicate matter. If not properly done it can completely suppress a language forcing speakers to shift towards a new language that is totally different and ultimately their heritage language dies. There is a danger in ignoring the feelings of the language users as the Ndau speakers always indicated discomfort in using the standard Shona orthography. This also indicates the need to make use of language planners who are faithful to the steps of language planning. Fact finding especially in the African environment (where most of the facts are not documented) should be considered the foundation of success of a language planning exercise. Had Clement Doke faithfully considered the historical background of the Ndau speakers in his fact finding mission, this would never have happened as he would have realised that the relationship Ndau has with Shona points to the two being members of the same language family (Bantu) rather than varieties of the same language. This is also giving credit to the Afrocentric argument that people should labour to groom their own experts to tell their own stories. Zimbabweans must handle their own delicate domestic matters as the use of foreigners who do not share the background and languages are likely to make such errors.

One would begin to wonder how much damage this scenario had on the Ndau people's lives. Firstly there is already a negative attitude towards their own language. Young ones would need a lot of elders' effort for them to respect their heritage language. They were supposed to have acquired Ndau as a first language but were denied the opportunity and this means even if they learn there is little or no possibility that they would become native like speakers. The suppression of the language goes with the suppression of the culture and traditional wisdom. Loss of interest in the language has obviously costed them a lot of their culture and traditional wisdom. Such losses would never be recovered as some of the elders who could have passed on some wisdom are already gone.

Considering such a situation one begins wondering how many languages have suffered or are suffering a similar fate throughout the world as well as where they are right now. In the Shona context one would again wonder if Korekore is not suffering a similar fate. Firstly, there have always been complaints on the appropriateness of the prescribed orthography with Korekore speakers demonstrating that Zezuru and Karanga contributed almost every bit of the orthography. Secondly, all speakers of the Shona varieties do not find the Korekore variety having much mutual intelligibility with the others. Ofcourse mutual intelligibility is a continuum but there must always be a considerable degree of it to demonstrate that the varieties in question belong to the same language and are not independent languages belonging to the same language family.

### Conclusion

Standardisation has a lot of power over languages and language varieties. The paper demonstrates that if not properly done it might fuel language shift which leads to the ultimate death of some languages together with their cultures and traditional wisdoms. This serves to say language planning and national language policies can easily facilitate death of entire languages if not properly crafted and carried out. The Ndau example demonstrates how easily languages can be totally wiped out from the speech community through standardisation.

### Recommendation

Nations need to first understand the importance of multilingualism and take it upon themselves to serve all the languages involved from powerful forces like standardisation. They should also come to understand how easily standardisation can wipe out languages together with their cultures and traditions.

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